

Message Text

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NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /058 W
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R 101745Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9277
INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA
AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
AMEMBASSY LISBON
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY REYKJAVIK
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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, BE, PGOV
SUBJECT: BELGIUM TO THE POLLS

SUMMARY: BELGIANS WILL BE GOING TO THE POLLS APRIL 17 IN
THE HOPE OF PRODUCING A SOLID MAJORITY GOVERNMENT ABLE TO
DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH CURRENT PROBLEMS OF UNEMPLOYMENT,
INFLATION AND A SLOW-GROWING ECONOMY. TINDEMANS FORCED NEW
ELECTIONS BECAUSE A FRANCOPHONE-FLEMISH DEADLOCK ON
REGIONALIZATION POLICY REDUCED HIS GOVERNMENT TO NEAR
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IMMOBILITY. TINDEMANS, STILL POPULAR, MAY WELL BE
THE FORMATEUR OF A NEW GOVERNMENT AFTER ELECTIONS. THE
LEADING SOCIALIST ASPIRANT IS FORMER EC COMMISSIONER
HENRI SIMONET. FOREIGN POLICY WILL NOT FIGURE
PROMINENTLY IN THE 40-DAY CAMPAIGN, ALTHOUGH DANGER
EXISTS OF DEMAGOGIC EXPLOITATION OF SITUATIONS INVOLVING
FOREIGN INTERESTS. TINDEMANS WILL BE ABLE TO CARRY ON

GOVERNMENT NEARLY AS USUAL PRIOR TO ELECTIONS, BUT HIS GOVERNMENT WILL TEND TO AVOID MAJOR INITIATIVES AND SIDE STEP DIFFICULT PROBLEMS. END SUMMARY.

1. THE GOVERNMENT OF LEO TINDEMANS (APRIL, 1974 - APRIL, 1977), NOW RUNNING OUT ITS LAST 40 DAYS, HAS THROWN IN THE TOWEL BECAUSE THE PRIME MINISTER BECAME CONVINCED THAT HE COULD NO LONGER PROVIDE BELGIUM WITH CONSEQUENT GOVERNMENT. HIS RANGE OF INITIATIVE PROGRESSIVELY SHORTENED IN THE LAST MONTHS AS HIS ALWAYS SLIM PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY NARROWED AND FINALLY DISAPPEARED LAST WEEK. THE TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT COULD HAVE STRUGGLED ALONG - CONCEIVABLY FOR ANOTHER YEAR - BECAUSE THE OPPOSITION WAS NOT UNIFIED ENOUGH TO BRING IT DOWN. BUT TINDEMANS WOULD HAVE HAD TO SURVIVE ON THE BASIS OF GOVERNING AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. HE CONCLUDED THAT MERE SURVIVAL WAS NOT WORTH THE TAUNTS, SLIGHTS AND ENFORCED IMMOBILITY WHICH HIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN FORCED MORE AND MORE TO ENDURE.

2. TINDEMANS BECAME PRIME MINISTER THREE YEARS AGO WITH THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF BRINGING ABOUT AN AGREED SOLUTION OF THE DIVISIVE COMMUNITIES QUESTION" BY MEANS OF A REORGANIZATION OF THE BELGIAN STATE INTO AUTONOMOUS REGIONS. HIS ODD COALITION OF PARTIES WAS FORMED TO ACHIEVE THAT END. TINDEMANS' LOW-KEY, INDIRECT, STEP-BY-SLOW-STEP ACTICS ADVANCED SUBSTANTIALLY THE AREA OF CONSENSUS ON THE NATURE OF THE REGIONALIZATION REFORM. BUT, WITH SUCCESS SEEMINGLY COMING INTO SIGHT, HIS EFFORT FAILED.

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THAT IT WAS BROUGHT TO FAILURE BY THE ERRATIC BEHAVIOR OF A MINOR COALITION PARTY WITH A KAMIKAZE MENTALITY (RASSEMBLEMENT WALLON) WILL BECOME JUST AN HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE. THE REAL CAUSE WAS A LACK OF MEETING OF MINDS AMONG PEOPLE THAT COUNT. IN THE CRUNCH TINDEMANS TRIED TO RALLY BELGIUM'S THREE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL FORCES - SOCIALISTS, LIBERALS AND CHRISTIANS REPRESENTING THREE-QUARTERS OF THE ELECTORATE - TO DEFINE THE ESSENTIAL OUTLINES OF THE REGIONALIZATION BLUEPRINT. HE WAS UNABLE TO RAISE THE DISCUSSION FROM THE INEFFECTIVE LEVEL OF PARTISAN HORSE-TRADING TO ONE OF STATESMANSHP. HIS LAST-DITCH WEEKEND EFFORT COLLAPSED, ESSENTIALLY BECAUSE OF PROFOUND MISTRUST BETWEEN SOCIALIST AND FLEMISH CHRISTIAN LEADERS. TUESDAY EVENING TINDEMANS DECIDED TO TURN TO THE BELGIAN ELECTORATE TO POINT A WAY OUT OF THE DEAD-END THAT BELGIAN POLITICS HAS REACHED.

4. TINDEMANS' FAILURE MEANS THAT TENSION BETWEEN FLEMING AND FRANCOPHONE WILL REMAIN A DOMINATING FACTOR

IN BELGIAN NATIONAL LIFE FOR YEARS TO COME. THE NEW PARLIAMENT ELECTED APRIL 17 WILL HAVE TO WRESTLE WITH THE SAME OLD UNANSWERED QUESTIONS, AND ONLY THE PARLIAMENT AFTER THAT CAN ENACT THE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS NECESSARY TO REMOVE THE ISSUE FROM THE AGENDA OF DAILY POLITICS. THIS IS LONG-TERM BAD NEWS, BECAUSE THE COMMUNITIES QUESTION HAS HAD - AND WILL RETAIN - THE POTENTIAL TO DISTORT POLICY ISSUES THAT REALLY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH FLEMING AND FRANCOPHONE AND TO IMPEDE OR PREVENT RATIONAL HANDLING OF PRACTICAL QUESTIONS OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL POLICY.

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5. IN THE SHORT RUN THERE IS SOME HOPE THAT THE APRIL ELECTIONS WILL RESULT IN A GOVERNMENT ABLE TO ADDRESS WITH GREATER ENERGY AND EFFECT THE NATION'S PERSISTING PROBLEMS OF HIGH INFLATION, HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT

AND LAGGING ECONOMIC ACTIVITY. MANY ORDINARY BELGIANS ARE TALKING HOPEFULLY NOW OF THE RE-FORMATION OF A "BIG" COALITION OF THE CHRISTIAN AND SOCIALIST PARTIES, TOGETHER COMMANDING A SOLID MAJORITY NOT ONLY NATIONALLY BUT ALSO IN THE THREE "REGIONS" OF THE COUNTRY - FLANDERS, WALLONIA AND BRUSSELS. (TINDEMANS
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LACK OF MAJORITY SUPPORT IN WALLONIA PROVED A SERIOUS HANDICAP WHEN, ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS DURING THE 1974-76 RECESSION, HE ATTEMPTED TO PUT THROUGH A COMPREHENSIVE RECOVERY AND STABILIZATION PROGRAM.) AS THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS, NO TIDAL WAVE OF OPINION IN ANY DIRECTION, WITH RESPECT TO POLICY OR PARTY, IS APPARENT. THE DOMINANT EMOTION APPEARS TO BE HOPE THAT BELGIUM CAN COME UP WITH AN ACTIVIST GOVERNMENT CAPABLE OF EFFECTIVE MEASURES TO BRING BACK GOOD TIMES.

6. EITHER THE CHRISTIAN PARTY (FLEMISH OR FRANCOPHONE DIVISIONS) OR THE SOCIALIST PSB ARE REGARDED AS ALL BUT CERTAIN TO PROVIDE THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER. ON THE CHRISTIAN SIDE TINDEMANS - STILL THE MOST POPULAR POLITICAL FIGURE IN THE COUNTRY - WILL BE A FRONT-RUNNER TO BE CHOSEN TO FORM A NEW GOVERNMENT. FOR THE SOCIALISTS HENRI SIMONET - FORMER EC COMMISSIONER, A BRUSSELS-BASED MODERATE SOCIALIST - IS THE LEADING ASPIRANT.

7. FOREIGN POLICY IS NOT GENERALLY A SUBJECT OF PARTISAN CONTROVERSY IN BELGIUM, AND NO CURRENT OR IMPENDING ISSUES OF INTERNATIONAL POLICY WILL FIGURE PROMINENTLY IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. HOWEVER, THERE WILL BE PARTIES AND POLITICIANS MORE THAN READY TO EXPLOIT SITUATIONS INVOLVING FOREIGN INTERESTS IF THEY APPEAR TO PROMISE BALLOT-BOX GAINS. (COMMENT: WE MUST BE ALERT DURING THE NEXT SIX WEEKS TO AVOID GIVING OCCASION TO BE DRAWN INTO THE POLITICAL CONTEST - INVOLVEMENT WHICH COULD ONLY BE DAMAGING TO U.S. INTERESTS.)

8. BETWEEN NOW AND ELECTION DAY THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT WILL CONDUCT BUSINESS AS USUAL. LEGALLY ITS COMPETENCE IS LIMITED ONLY BY THE FACT THAT NO PARLIAMENT EXISTS TO PASS LEGISLATION OR TO GIVE CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORIZATION TO CERTAIN EXCEPTIONAL ACTS OF GOVERNMENT. POLITICALLY,
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THE GOVERNMENT - NO LONGER NEEDING TO KEEP A WARY EYE
ON A CANTANKEROUS PARLIAMENT - HAS LESS TO WORRY ABOUT
THAN HERETOFORE. NEVERTHELESS, A BELGIAN GOVERNMENT
RUNNING OUT ITS LAST DAYS IS UNLIKELY TO TURN ADVEN-
TUROUS OR COMBATIVE - PARTICULARLY WHEN ITS PRIME
MINISTER MAY BE LABORING TO CREATE A NEW COALITION
TWO MONTHS HENCE. ALL OF THE MINISTERS HAVE THEIR EYES ON THE
ELECTIONS AND WILL VIEW PROBLEMS LARGELY FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE.
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